

Chapter 13

Utopia

St. Thomas More

(1516)

Sir Thomas More (1477-1535) began his public career in London. A brilliant lawyer, he came to the attention of King Henry VIII, who was impressed by his intellect and sense of humor. The two became friends, and More rose in public service to become Lord Chancellor, the highest legal officer in the land. More was a member of the humanist community in England and a close friend of Erasmus. A believer in education for both men and women, More raised his daughters according to humanist principles; they became internationally renowned for their learning.

When Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church over the issue of his divorce, More refused to follow the king along the paths of Protestantism. He would not lend his support to the divorce or to the declaration of the king's supremacy in religious matters. Accused of treason and beheaded in 1535, More was subsequently canonized by the Catholic Church.

Utopia is an expression of More's humanist ideals. The first part, known as the Book of Counsel, contains a long debate over whether a humanist should become advisor to a king, a question which in More's case was to prove prophetic. The second part, from which the following excerpts are taken, describes the imaginary society of Utopia, which has lent its name to all subsequent proposals for ideal communities.

Questions

1. What do you think More's purpose was in writing *Utopia*? Do you think he expected such a society could ever be formed?
2. Musings on a perfect society can tell us much about the existing society from which they emanate. What were More's main concerns about the real world?
3. How does the Utopian economy function?
4. Utopians are not Christians, but More's account of their religion is a sympathetic one. What principle is at the heart of their religious beliefs?
5. How are humanist ideals reflected in *Utopia*?

Occupations

Agriculture is the one pursuit which is common to all, both men and women, without exception. They are all instructed in it from childhood, partly by principles taught in school, partly by field trips to the farms closer to the city as if for recreation. Here they do not merely look on, but, as opportunity arises for bodily exercise, they do the actual work.

Besides agriculture (which is, as I said, common to all), each is taught one particular craft as his own. This is generally either wool-working or linen-making or masonry or metal-working or carpentry. There is no other pursuit which occupies any number worth mentioning. As for clothes, these are of one and the same pattern throughout the island and down the centuries, though there is a distinction between the sexes and between the single and married. The garments are comely to the eye, convenient for bodily movement, and fit for wear in heat and cold. Each family, I say, does its own tailoring.

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2 Of the other crafts, one is learned by each person, and not the men only, but the women too. The
3 latter as the weaker sex have the lighter occupations and generally work wool and flax. To the men are
4 committed the remaining more laborious crafts. For the most part, each is brought up in his father's craft,
5 for which most have a natural inclination. But if anyone is attracted to another occupation, he is
6 transferred by adoption to a family pursuing that craft for which he has a liking.

8 Social Relations

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10 But now, it seems, I must explain the behavior of the
11 citizens toward one another, the nature of their social relations, and
12 the method of distribution of goods. Since the city consists of
13 households, households as a rule are made up of those related by
14 blood. Girls, upon reaching womanhood and upon being settled in
15 marriage, go to their husbands domiciles. On the other hand, male
16 children and then grandchildren remain in the family and are
17 subject to the oldest parent, unless he has become a dotard with old
18 age. In the latter case the next oldest is put in his place.

19
20 Every city is divided into four equal districts. In the middle
21 of each quarter is a market of all kinds of commodities. To
22 designated market buildings the products of each family are
23 conveyed. Each kind of goods is arranged separately in
24 storehouses. From the latter any head of a household seeks what he
25 and his require and, without money or any kind of compensation,
26 carries off what he seeks. Why should anything be refused? First,
27 there is plentiful supply of all things, and secondly, there is no
28 underlying fear that anyone will demand more than he needs. Why
29 should there be any suspicion that someone may demand an
30 excessive amount when he is certain of never being in want? No
31 doubt about it, avarice and greed are aroused in every kind of living creature by the fear of want, but only
32 in man are they motivated by pride alone – pride which counts it a personal glory to excel others by
33 superfluous display of possessions. The latter vice can have no place at all in the Utopian scheme of
34 things.

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36 Meanwhile, gold and silver, of which money is made, are so treated by them that no one values
37 them more highly than their true nature deserves. Who does not see that they are far inferior to iron in
38 usefulness since without iron mortals cannot live any more than without fire and water? To gold and
39 silver, however, nature has given no use that we cannot dispense with, if the folly of men had not made
40 them valuable because they are rare. On the other hand, like a most kind and indulgent mother, she
41 [nature] has exposed to view all that is best, like air and water and earth itself, but has removed as far as
42 possible from us all vain and unprofitable things.

43
44 If in Utopia these metals were kept locked up in a tower, it might be suspected that the governor
45 and the senate – for such is the foolish imagination of the common folk – were deceiving the people by
46 the scheme and they themselves were deriving some benefit therefrom. Moreover, if they made them into
47 drinking vessels and other such skillful handiwork, then if occasion arose for them all to be melted down
48 again and applied to the pay of soldiers, they realize that people would be unwilling to be deprived of
49 what they had once begun to treasure.



1 In that part of philosophy which deals with morals, they carry on the same debates as we do. They
2 inquire into the good: of the soul and of the body and of external gifts. They ask also whether the name of
3 good may be applied to all three or simply belongs to the endowments of the soul. They discuss virtue
4 and pleasure, but their principal and chief debate is in what thing or things, one or more, they are to hold
5 that happiness consists. In this matter they seem to lean more than they should to the school that espouses
6 pleasure as the object by which to define either the whole or the chief part of human happiness.

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8 What is more astonishing is that they seek a defense for this soft doctrine from their religion,
9 which is serious and strict, almost solemn and hard. They never have a discussion of happiness without
10 uniting certain principles taken from religion as well as from philosophy, which uses rational arguments.
11 Without these principles they think reason insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true
12 happiness. The following are examples of these principles. The soul is immortal and by the goodness of
13 God born for happiness. After this life rewards are appointed for our virtues and good deeds, punishment
14 for our crimes. Though these principles belong to religion, yet they hold that reason leads men to believe
15 and to admit them [the principles].

16
17 As it is, they hold happiness rests not in every kind of pleasure but only in good and decent
18 pleasure. To such, as to the supreme good, our nature is drawn by virtue itself, to which the opposite
19 school alone attributes happiness. The Utopians define virtue as living according to nature since to this
20 end we were created by God. That individual, they say, is following the guidance of nature who, in
21 desiring one thing and avoiding another, obeys the dictates of reason.

22
23 Women do not marry till eighteen, men not till they are four years older. If before marriage a man
24 or woman is convicted of secret intercourse, he or she is severely punished, and they are forbidden to
25 marry altogether unless the governor's pardon remits their guilt. In addition, both father and mother of the
26 family in whose house the offense was committed incur great disgrace as having been neglectful in doing
27 their duties. The reason why they punish this offense so severely is their foreknowledge that, unless
28 persons are carefully restrained from promiscuous intercourse, few will unite in married love, in which
29 state a whole life must be spent with one companion and all the troubles incidental to it must be patiently
30 borne....

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32 They have very few laws because very few are needed for persons so educated. The chief fault
33 they find with other peoples is that almost innumerable books of laws and commentaries are not
34 sufficient. They themselves think it most unfair that any group of men should be bound by laws which are
35 either too numerous to be read through or too obscure to be understood by anyone....they have, as I said,
36 very few laws and, secondly, they regard the most obvious interpretation of the law as the most fair
37 interpretation.

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39 This policy follows from their reasoning that, since all laws are promulgated to remind every man
40 of his duty, the more recondite interpretation reminds only very few (for there are few who can arrive at
41 it) whereas the more simple and obvious sense of the laws is open to all. Otherwise, what difference
42 would it make for the common people, who are the most numerous and also most in need of instruction,
43 whether you framed no law at all or whether the interpretation of the law you framed was such that no one
44 could elicit it except by great ingenuity and long argument? Now, the untrained judgment of the common
45 people cannot attain to the meaning of such an interpretation nor can their lives be long enough, seeing
46 that they are wholly taken up with getting a living.